

Statement of Rep. James A. Leach
Chairman, Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific
Hearing on “North Korean Brinkmanship:
Is U.S. Policy Up to the Challenge?”
June 29, 2006

We greatly appreciate Assistant Secretary Hill making himself available to the Subcommittee on such short notice. Ambassador Hill, since you last appeared before us three months ago some aspects of the strategic situation with North Korea have changed, and others have not.

One thing that unfortunately has not changed is the apparent lifelessness of the Six Party process. We are now nine months beyond the Joint Statement of principles under which North Korea “committed to abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs,” but are no closer to realizing those goals. I regret that the Administration has not during this time allowed you or other emissaries to visit Pyongyang to test the boundaries and push the implementation of the Joint Statement.

At least two important things have changed. First, the North Koreans have had an additional nine months to produce fissile material. An expert report released three days ago assesses that North Korea has now separated enough plutonium for somewhere between 4 and 13 nuclear weapons, more than a 50% increase over the amount they were believed to possess prior to 2003.

Second, the North Koreans have reportedly stood up a long-range ballistic missile on a launch pad at Taepodong, though it remains unclear whether those actions represent preparations for an actual launch or a provocative plea for U.S. attention. In rejecting a surprising proposal by former Secretary of Defense William Perry – a proposal also endorsed by former Vice President Walter Mondale – to destroy the missile before launch, National Security Advisor Hadley recently stated that “we think diplomacy is the right answer and that is what we are pursuing.” While I share Mr. Hadley’s aversion to a reckless first strike, I must respectfully question the professionalism with which the Administration is pursuing the various diplomatic options available to it.

It is sometimes remarked, usually humorously, that adults rarely get far beyond junior high school thinking. When I was a student at the Sudlow

Junior High School in Davenport, Iowa, one of the social games we used to engage in was a “staredown” – a challenge to see who could stare the longest at someone else without blinking. Bizarrely, our interactions with North Korea seem to have certain staredown dimensions that are just as juvenile.

I can think of few things that are less rational than tying the United States national interest to the question of blinking. By treating most forms of direct conversation with North Korea as blinkmanship rather than statesmanship, the Administration has not demonstrated a lack of trust in Pyongyang so much as a lack of trust in its own abilities to conduct creative diplomacy in pursuit of our national interest. Diplomacy is all about the respectful exchange of perspectives between parties, even – and perhaps especially – between mutually mistrustful parties.

It is irrational for the most powerful country on the earth to be fearful of diplomacy. It is realistic to measure your enemies and understand their motivations and actions. It is pseudo-realism to ignore opportunities to reach mutual accommodation simply because an effort might involve taking the first step.

At present, the United States is in an ironic circumstance where we have tied ourselves exclusively to a multilateral process in which other parties are taking the lead. It is self-evident that the Six Party talks are a reasonable framework within which to pursue the denuclearization of North Korea. But it is also true that other parties have supplemented Six Party contacts with bilateral discussions outside the Beijing framework, and that they would welcome more robust, direct U.S. initiatives with North Korea. For us to remain instead diplomatically reactive cedes too much initiative to actors whose interests are not identical with our own, and allows the North Koreans and others to bizarrely paint us as an intransigent party.

Six weeks ago, I proposed to the Executive branch a precise initiative for seizing the initiative in restarting dialogue with North Korea. I believe it would be appropriate to send a Presidential envoy of significant stature to Pyongyang. The envoy’s message should neither be a macho line-in-the-sand approach, nor a begging please-return-to-the-talks plea. It should be an approach designed to induce both a negotiating commitment and an attitudinal breakthrough. In my judgment, the most promising proposal would be one which provides impetus to the parties’ previous commitment

in the Joint Statement to develop a peace treaty to bring the Korean War to a formal conclusion. A precise date and site for the holding of a formal peace conference should be put on the table with the goal of receiving an acceptance during the visit. An understanding might follow that the Six Party talks would resume shortly after the peace conference and that negotiations might also then commence on the possibility of establishing liaison offices and eventually embassies in our respective capitals.

The diplomatic issue our government has to come to grips with today is the problem of sequencing. Which comes first – the chicken or the egg – is the most cheerful and abstract philosophical discussion Americans engage in. But which precedes the other – talk or war – is neither cheerful nor abstract. Experience would seem to indicate that while war may not be averted by negotiations, it is less likely to break out if direct dialogue occurs beforehand. In adversarial situations pacific results can seldom be achieved without human interaction. That is why our founders clearly contemplated that the new American Republic would have diplomatic relations with undemocratic states. It is why Israeli Prime Minister Rabin, when faulted for talking to Arafat, noted that you don't make peace with friends.

With regard to North Korea, sequencing has been a particularly critical U.S. concern. Some in the White House have held that nothing should occur until North Korea capitulates on the nuclear issue. But a peace treaty stands outside the other Six Party issues to the degree that it does not involve all the parties and makes sense whatever the other results. The fact that North Korea has indicated support for such a prospect should not cause us to think that it is thus to our strategic advantage to hold a peace agreement hostage to the nuclear issue. In fact, it would help to eliminate one of North Korea's stated pretexts for its nuclear activities.

Taking the initiative to provide a framework for a peace conference signaling an end the Korean War would underscore our peaceful intent, and remind the Korean people, North and South, that the United States singularly and unequivocally supports the peaceful reunification of the Peninsula. The fact that the process suggestion would be American would shake up the negotiating dynamics, which North Korea has so far been using to serve its purposes of delay, and would perhaps give momentum to other dimensions of the Joint Statement.

I have not received an Administration response to this proposal. In the meantime, four weeks ago, the North Koreans invited Assistant Secretary Hill to Pyongyang for bilateral discussions on implementing the Joint Statement, an invitation that the Administration declined. Subsequently, and perhaps in response, the North Koreans finished assembling a long-range ballistic missile on the Taepodong launch pad.

Given North Korea's track record, I of course share the Administration's healthy skepticism about its strategic intentions. But skepticism is an attitude, not a policy. It is critical for the Administration to form a creative, coherent response to the growing North Korean nuclear threats to our national security. To this end, we cannot say that we are committed to a diplomatic solution if our diplomats are not allowed to accept invitations to talk. Americans understand the North Korean Challenge. What is less explicable is the U.S. posture. Time and opportunity cannot continue to be frittered away. In governance, policy to be effective must be timely as well as thoughtful.

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